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Contents

Calendar 4 to 14

Features
3 Jeff Simon on what was, is and forever will be "cool."

Reviews
18 John Dwyer on the movie "Gregory's Girl."
22 Jim Bisco on the African-American Cultural Center's "Let's Take a Look."

Nightlife
28 Jim Bisco visits the new 2001 club. Janice Okun dines in One World Cookery.
35 William Murray on California wines.

Inside Straight
2 On Gov. Carey's election retreat, rock performer Peter Gabriel's respite, on the price of a radio, Buffalo dancers make good, and a contest.

Recordings
36 Jeff Simon on when the jazz critics fell on their face.
39 Dale Anderson on Joni Mitchell's newest.

Joni Mitchell

Movies
17 Cinemascore polls moviegoers.
26 James Brady's Eavesdropping.

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COOL, MAN, COOL

A casual reconsideration of an enduring attitude.

Coolest Car of All Time? *1953 Studebaker (that's company President H.S. Vance)*

By JEFF SIMON
News Critic

TWO '80s pre-teens are discussing life, parents and the Wonderful World of Products, the way pre-teens have been doing for decades. Josh has a new computer game. He tells Emily, "It's cool."

What he's saying isn't so terribly different from what Dizzy Gillespie in goatee and beret might have said to Charlie Parker after hours 40 years ago at Minton's Playhouse. The context and aesthetic senses are worlds apart but the meaning isn't so different.

"Be cool," says the first song on Side Two of Joni Mitchell's new record "Wild Things Run Fast." ("If there's one rule to this game/Everybody can name real plain/It's be cool.")

Very few words in American slang have retained their original meaning *and* their popularity. "Cool" as Jill St. John might put it in Rodeo Drive patois, is a "survivor." Other words come and go but cool goes on forever. It seems to have settled in nicely ever since it first saw light in the bebop '40s. At the very least, these days it's making a comeback. Maybe, just maybe, something important is going on here. Gene Sculatti thinks so.

"Cool is not a fad or a fashion," he says in the prologue to the new book "A Catalog of Cool" (Warner Paper, 216 pp., $6.95). "Therefore cool's enemies are not 'preppy' or 'punk' or next month's unearthed or invented sensibilities. Cool's beef is with misapplied style, false expression — attitudes and tastes that have nothing to do with the person who adopts them. Thousand buck cowboy ensembles, idle jet-setters who send nanny out to find them New Wave togs for the cocktail party, (Fatigue Chic! You want khaki parachute pants? Enlist).

"To the outsider, the manifestations of cool may look arbitrary. That's because cool is selective in the way it reveals itself. It isn't elitist but it knows its own. Cool never takes to the streets or billboards to proselytize; if you've got the goods the mountain will eventually come to you.

"True cool is eternal. Its independence from prevailing tastes is just one indication that cool follows its own mind for a reason. Like any deep faith, cool's flame burns, vanishes, reappears. Cool runs underground much of the time but it never slows up. Like lightning, it links its past practitioners to its present with a flash and a fingersnap. Duchamp shakes hands with Dizzy Gillespie. Lenny Bruce cracks a line. Dylan cribs it in scribbling a song. A hundred years later, some seventeen year old girl will name a magazine after the song and publish a photo of Diz and Duchamp slapping five at Birdland."

Subtract the ersatz religioso elements in Sculatti's definition (always a good idea for clarity anywhere) and maybe he's on to something. Attached to his manifesto in his "Catalog of Cool" a couple hundred pages of coolness picked out by the likes of old line jazz writer Joe Goldberg, top level rock writers Nick Tosches and Richard Meltzer and such unclassifiables as Bob Merlis and Swamp Dogg, whose name formerly was Jerry Williams Jr., the man who, says the catalog, "cut such uncut gems as 'California is Drowning and I Live Down by the River' and 'Eat the Goose (Before the Goose Eats You).'"

Obviously, not all that is good is cool, at least not if you're out of your teens. The Beatles are as fine as anything that ever happened to pop music but, no matter what the catalog says about the early records, you'd be hard-pressed to call them cool. (Lennon, yes, at times but never the group as a whole). Francis Ford Coppola and D.W. Griffith are both great film directors in vastly different ways and degrees, but you could hardly call either one "cool." As 19th century writers go, Baudelaire, Poe, Thoreau and Dostoevsky are clearly cool, Victor Hugo, Walt Whirman, Emerson and Tolstoy are clearly not (on second thought, maybe none of them are).

Sculatti gets around the possibility that all that is cool may not be good this way: "Cool has nothing to do with being 'with it' or 'in' by contemporary standards. If anything, like the holy fool, cool is often out of step. It's misunderstood, persecuted or simply ignored in its time. True cool is nothing more (or less) than the fullest expression of what it is that's different or unique about a person."

Sculatti's catalog includes "Lives of the Hipster Saints" (Al "Jaaaceaue" Collins, George Hunter, Lord Buckley, Robert Mitchum, Jack Kerouac, Lenny Bruce, and, bless this book's heart, Louis Prima as praised by Nick Tosches. Any book that loves Louis Prima can't be all bad.)

The rest are items. For instance, a great cool artifact in American film — Arthur Ripley's "Thunder Road" (1958) is described thus: "Flickdom's granddaddy of cool, bad Bob Mitchum, in a barbituate soaked performance with equally zonked-out love interest Kelley Smith. When some creep tries running moonshiner Mitch off the road, Mr. Heavylids coolly removed the old cig from his lips, and flicks it across his car, out the window and into the creep's car. It lands in his lap and he drives screaming to his death over an embankment.

"Mitchum never changes his expression."

As you can see, the juvenility quotient is high in the book but it shouldn't be judged too harshly. Juvenility is usually the price that's paid for strenuously maintained innocence.

A lot of the items are patently absurd. Many of the entries are shortsighted.

So really, what we've got here is only half serious, if that much. It's a game. Any number can play, even your Aunt Sadie or Uncle Thornton if they're so perversely inclined. It's called "What's Cool?"

Take, for instance!

COOL SOUNDS

Among "Catalog" items: Abba ("bubblegum on ice" says the catalog), Mose Allison, Beach Boys ("none cooler on the coast 1962-66"), B-52's ("they sing of lava, lobsters, strobes and space"), Blondie, James Brown, the Byrds, Gene Chandler, Eddie Cochran, Sam Cooke, Bobby Darin, Dion, The Doors, Howlin' Wolf, Etta James, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Willie John, Henry Mancini, Roger Miller, The Ramones, Paul Revere and the Raiders, Rolling Stones, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Wilson, the Zombies.

Quarrels with the Catalog: Henry Mancini? Paul Revere and the Raiders? C'mon.

Continued on Page 16

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